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A CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF SIN

REV. WILLIAM W. McLANE, PH.D., D.D.
New Haven, Conn.

Sin seems to many to be a forgotten fact of human experience. Vice which violates the laws of health is visible. Crime which disrupts the social order is manifest and condemnable. But sin—a moral state—which separates the soul from God, and which is the source of suffering and sorrow, is something of which men are insensible. There is a superficial confession of human imperfection, but there is not a profound conviction of sin. Many things have conduced to produce this state of mind. The scientific view of man as a creature evolving from a lower to a higher state, the sociological conception of man as part of a community whose solidarity shapes his character, and the theological idea of man as a child of God to whom the Father owes love and care, all contribute to lessen the sense of individual responsibility, of personal accountability for choice, and of guilt for wrong character or conduct.

Sin formerly was considered as a fall from a higher to a lower state, as transgression of prohibitory law, as guilt whose punishment should be imprisonment and torment. The fall of man, original sin, actual transgression, and eternal punishment were themes for the pulpit and truths for the people. But men who regard themselves as evolving from a lower to a higher state, as part of a community whose sentiments, principles, and practices shape their individual choice and courage, and as children to whom God is a Father rather than a King, are not deeply impressed by doctrines of sin which once profoundly influenced men.

It is not the present purpose to deny the doctrines of the past. Obviously, however, the doctrines of sin and punishment which have been taught by the Christian church were conceived and formulated by men whose ideas of the universe, of God's relation to creation, of the origin of man, of the divine purpose in permitting evil, and of the conditions of salvation, differed considerably from the ideas

prevalent today. It should be observed and noted, however, that this change in point of view and difference in opinion do not destroy the fundamental facts in the case. This is what some men seem to have forgotten. Granted that man is a creature evolving from a lower to a higher state, a failure to rise is a conceivable possibility for the race, and a fall from a higher state once attained to a lower one is sometimes an actual fact in individual experience. Granted that the individual is part of a society which has a certain solidarity, that fact emphasizes the force of heredity and the force of environment which involve the individual in the common lot. Thereby is conserved much of the truth of the past; but the law of variation is not destroyed by which the individual, through his own choice and action, may rise above heredity and surpass the common environment. They who recognize the common facts of human history will find place for the doctrines of sin and punishment, grace and salvation.

There is a Christian conception of sin which is in harmony with the scientific and sociological view of man now prevalent, and which should be clearly seen by the preacher and forcefully presented to the people. This is here called *a* Christian conception, rather than *the* Christian conception, because it does not exclude other facts and ideas of sin. The fall of a moral being from a higher to a lower state is sin; but the voluntary failure of a moral being to rise from a lower to a higher state is also sin. To eat forbidden fruit which gives the knowledge of evil is sin; to refuse to eat the fruit of the tree of life is also sin. Disobedience to the command of God as King is sin; but refusal to accept the invitation of God as Father is also sin. Self-will which accepts and follows the way of lustfulness is sin; but unbelief which refuses to accept and to follow the guidance and the way of divine love is also sin.

"To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin," says St. James. Two things are to be noted here; namely, the negative character of sin which consists in not doing, and the positive character of guilt resting upon him who voluntarily refuses to do what he knows to be good. The Christian conception of sin is this: the refusal of man to hear the voice of God; the declination by man of the divine invitation to believe in God and to be served by him; the rejection by man of the spirit of love and life; the failure on the

part of man to attain "unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." This is Christ's conception of sin, and to his teachings attention is now chiefly invited.

Jesus' thought of man is that man is a creature made to be born again, born anew, born into the kingdom of heaven, born into such relations as make him conscious of God, voluntarily dependent upon him, and obedient to him. The unborn babe is made for birth; he has organs, such as eyes, ears, and hands, which are fitted for, and which can be developed only in, a larger world than that of the womb. Entrance into that larger world is birth. Failure to enter that world would be to fail of the true end of life. Now, in the thought of Jesus, regeneration is as natural as generation, and birth into the kingdom is as natural as birth into the world. A man must be born into the kingdom of heaven, because he is made for that kingdom. He has capacities which can never be filled save by communion with God. He has powers which can never be developed save by the service of God. Refusal, on the part of man, to fulfil the conditions of that birth is sin unto death.

Paul's thought is along this same line. Paul, in treating of the resurrection, and of the spiritual life which underlies it and makes it possible, contrasts the life received through faith in Christ with the life which a man has by descent from Adam and says: "That is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual." The *ψυχικόν* precedes the *πνευματικόν*. John's thought reveals the moral quality of that life. "Everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God." To know the love that God has to us, and to dwell in that love so as to love God in return, and to love man as God loves him, is to have that which is called spiritual life, life in the kingdom, life eternal. Now, in the thought of Jesus, to remain insensible to this love of God, and thereby to fail to be quickened by it, to fail to be inspired by it, and to live according to it, is sin. This is the chief sin. It is sin against love. Jesus says: "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men loved the darkness rather than the light." Jesus charged the Jews of his day with this sin: "Ye will not come to me that ye may have life." Jesus laid the guilt of the people of Jerusalem to this fact. Throughout her history the people persecuted the prophets,

scourged the teachers, crucified the witnesses of righteousness, and finally rejected the Son of God who would have gathered them unto himself, but they would not. In the thought of Jesus, Jerusalem's refusal, in all her history, to accept the light, the truth, the love, which God was seeking to impart, was the supreme sin.

The parables of Jesus convey to the mind the same conception of sin. The kingdom of God is like "a certain man who made a great supper and bade many. And they all with one consent began to make excuse." "And the lord said: None of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper." "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, which made a marriage feast for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the marriage feast: and they would not come." The parable of the foolish virgins who failed to take oil for their lamps and to be ready when the bridegroom came; the parable of the unused talent which was wrapped in a napkin; the parable of the wicked husbandmen who refused to render the fruits of the vineyard to the owner thereof, and killed his servants because they would not serve the master; and the parable of the man without a wedding garment at the wedding feast, are all illustrative of the same principle, that sin is (1) unwillingness to receive the grace of God; (2) failure to use the gifts of God; (3) inability, moral and vital, to render to God what is due; and (4) utter unfitness and unworthiness to have a place in his presence or to enter his kingdom.

The condemning judgments of Jesus rest upon the same principle. The fig tree on Mount Olivet, which had leaves but no fruit, withered at the word of Jesus, because in his sight worthlessness is wickedness. The disciples were commanded to shake the dust from their feet and depart from any city which would not receive their message of grace. The nations are to be judged and rewarded or condemned by Jesus, according as they have given or withheld love. They who have given no food to the hungry, no water to the thirsty, no clothes to the naked, and no ministry to the sick, are condemned. The loveless life whose selfish limitations show that it has not dwelt in the love of God is, in Jesus' sight, a worthless life, and therefore a wicked life.

Jesus' thought is this: The kingdom of God is over men, embra-

cing men, open to men; failure to enter that kingdom when God has given all the conditions necessary thereunto is to fail of the very end of life and to incur abiding condemnation. Jesus began to preach, and to say: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He bade men: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." He taught men to pray to the Father and to say: "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done." According to the teachings of Jesus, not to enter by the narrow gate, not to walk in the straight way, not to follow the footsteps of the holy, not to abound in works of love—this is sin. And the root of this sin is refusal to receive the grace of God which brings salvation and teaches how to live.

Sin is like a bud which voluntarily shuts out the light; a fruit which excludes the warmth; a sheep which refuses the guidance of the shepherd; a child which declines to learn from the teacher; a steward who wastes the substance intrusted to his care by misuse; an heir who despises his natural inheritance. This has been the form of sin from the beginning of human history. This is the fundamental sin set forth in all the Scriptures. Man in the Garden, rejecting the tree of life and choosing the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of evil; men prior to the flood, walking in the ways of lust rather than in the ways of love; men in the wilderness, refusing, through unbelief, to enter the promised land; men, in Judea and Samaria, turning from the worship of Jehovah to that of Baal; men, in the cities of Israel, refusing the word of the prophets which was the truth of God; men, in Jerusalem, despising and crucifying Jesus, the Christ, demanding Barabbas and crying, "We have no king but Cæsar"—all these first have failed to receive the grace of God, and then have fallen by their iniquities. And there is no salvation save as they return unto the Lord and say unto him: "Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously."

This conception of sin should command the attention of men today. Respectable people, who, being free from vice and crime, are prone to cherish a pharisaic spirit and to flatter themselves that they are not as men have been and as some men now are, without even thanking God for what they are, may be led to see that, as in all forms of physical and mental life, failure to receive the best and to develop to the most is to fall short of the possibilities of such forms of life, so

here, in the highest relations and possibilities of human nature, to fail to recognize these relations and to fulfil these possibilities is to fall short of the true destiny of man. This is now, as ever, the great sin. Manifestly, the God whom Jesus reveals is worthy of faith and love, the spirit which Jesus possessed is worthy of reception, and the life which Jesus led is worthy of imitation and reproduction. They who wilfully fall short in these things make that failure in life which is sin.

With this view of sin, the teachings of the sacred Scriptures, as already shown, agree. The verb and the noun most commonly used in the Hebrew Scriptures, **חָטָא** and **חַטָּאת**, and the verb and the noun used in the Greek New Testament for the same purpose, *ἁμαρτάνω* and *ἁμαρτία*, signify "to err" and "failure." This is the meaning in both languages. The words mean to miss the mark, like an archer; to err from the path, like a traveler; to fail of perfection, like a blighted bud or a blasted fruit. According to the New Testament, the source of sin is *ἐπιθυμία*; that is, lust turning in selfishness from the higher to the lower with inordinate desire; the spirit of sin is *ἀνομία*; that is, lawlessness denying relations and disregarding duties; the form of sin is *ἀδικία*; that is, injustice, wrongdoing, injury to others; and the consequence of sin is *θάνατος*; that is, death.